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Ziegler, Carmen

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Carmen Ziegler

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Universität Hamburg
Institut für Ethnologie
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 (West)
D-20146 Hamburg
Tel.: 040 42838 4182
E-Mail: IfE@uni-hamburg.de
<http://www.ethnologie.uni-hamburg.de>

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Exploring the Russian Network at the Dreesch, a suburb of Schwerin

Carmen Ziegler

(translated and edited by Joachim Otto Habeck)

Introduction: Post-Soviet Migrants in a German City

My contribution to the seminar entitled “Angst in the City” is a small-scale network analysis that I conducted in my home city, Schwerin, with the aim to identify social relations among people with post-Soviet migratory background in one of the city’s residential areas.

To contextualise this research, a short summary of the history of migration from the ex-Soviet Union to Germany must be given. In 1989, approx. 2,039,000 ethnic Germans lived in the Russian Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR), the Ukrainian SSR and Kazakh SSR and other parts of the Soviet Union (Goskomstat 1990). Already before, but mainly after the reunification of Germany, the federal government pursued a policy of re-integrating German diaspora groups, granting German citizenship to virtually everyone who could prove a certain percentage of German ancestorship. In line with an unofficial ceiling of 200,000 immigrants per year, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s ethnic Germans and their relatives migrated from Russia, Kazakhstan, etc. to Germany, reaching an overall number of approximately 2.3 million (Darieva 2005: 154-155). Since newcomers showed the tendency to follow those who had already settled down, some villages, towns, and urban districts in Germany have a markedly higher percentage of migrants from the former Soviet Union than others. Not only ethnic Germans, but also ethnic Russians and Jews from the former Soviet Union (Darieva 2004) came to live in Germany. Predominantly, and as well in the case presented here, their language of communication is Russian, not depending on whether or not they have German citizenship. In my research project I define the “Russian network” as potentially comprising all those who came to the research area (see next paragraph) from the Soviet Union and its successor states at any point of time since 1989.

The research site is a suburb of Schwerin. With currently 92,000 inhabitants, Schwerin is a medium-sized city in the northeast of Germany. Its significance stems from the fact that it used to be the capital of one of the 14 districts of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and is now the capital of Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, one of the federal states of Germany. Owing to Schwerin’s status of a district centre, considerable investments were made in the construction of housing. As in other GDR cities, residential blocks were erected in the mode of *Plattenbau* (English translation: prefab, light

panel, or slab buildings). The largest of the *Plattenbau* areas of Schwerin was constructed between 1971 and 1983 and came to be known as *Großer Dreesch* or simply *Dreesch*. Located 3 to 4 kilometers off the historic city centre of Schwerin, the *Dreesch* used to be considered one of the most beautifully designed residential areas of the GDR, offering flats which were better equipped than older buildings in Schwerin. Following German unification, however, the *Dreesch* gradually came to be seen as unattractive, leading to a massive outmigration of former inhabitants to the newly reconstructed city centre of Schwerin or to West Germany. Today, many residents of Schwerin perceive the *Dreesch* as a “problematic” area. They see it as a hotspot of unemployed persons, a high number of people with migratory background, and “people who do not look after their children”, as I heard residents of Schwerin sometimes say. As the city council of Schwerin has neglected a sustainable communal-housing policy, inexpensive living space is rare. In consequence, low-income households move to *Plattenbau* areas such as the *Dreesch* because rents are relatively low there.

In addition, it must be mentioned that there has been a considerable increase of people with migratory background in the city of Schwerin since 1993. In that year, the percentage of migrants was 1.4%, whereas in 2003, it had risen to 4.2% (an increase by 150%). In the district Neu Zippendorf, which is part of the *Dreesch* of Schwerin, the percentage of migrants is 14,2 %, which is the highest concentration of migrants in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania. The dominant countries of origin are the Ukraine and Russia (Gerdes and Jakisch 2005). As of December 2015, Schwerin has around 92.000 inhabitants, 6000 of which have non-German citizenship and another 2000 of which are so called *Russlanddeutsche* (Hasselmann 2015), i.e. ethnic Germans from Russia and, in extension, other successor states of the Soviet Union, with German citizenship.

I have been acquainted with the *Dreesch* and its inhabitants for several years. Through voluntary work with “Bauspielplatz Schwerin e.V.” – an open-access centre for children and youths – I have come to know many local families, including those with a post-Soviet migratory background.

The idea for this research started from the observation that these migrants’ patterns of social organisation, distribution, and consumption of goods seemed to differ from those who do not speak Russian as everyday language. In other words: people from the former Soviet Union seem to be more closely economically connected among themselves than those who do not have that regional background. They seem to know each other and often coordinate their activities in ways different from those of long-term resident (German-speaking) Germans. I observed that when problems arose, many of them knew different people whom to ask for support. When, for example, bureaucratic requirements of the employment agency changed, they informed each other to make sure that everyone who belongs to them would share the

knowledge. Further, I had the impression that they use their connections in resourceful ways. Compared to the German colleagues they seemed to have a much bigger and complex network. In my perception, what unites them so strongly is their common Soviet origin and use of the Russian language.

I also observed that their children visited the Bauspielplatz less frequently than “local” German kids (if at all). My colleagues at the Bauspielplatz assumed that the migrants’ children had no time for playing at the Bauspielplatz because they were sent to “good” schools in the city centre and encouraged by their parents to spend their afternoons with sports, music school and extra tuition. My curiosity led me to ask whether there really is such a thing as a Russian network at the *Dreesch*, and if so, how does it function? The seminar with the title “Angst in the City” (see Schröder and Habeck, this issue) gave me the opportunity to investigate these questions.

Before continuing, a few terms and concepts should be specified. The term “Russian network” will be applied to all those with post-Soviet migratory background, be they of German, Russian or another ethnic belonging (in fact, residents of Schwerin use the term “Russians” for all those who use Russian as language of communication, regardless of ethnic affiliation). It may be presumed that they share not only a good command of Russian but also a specific socialist cultural history. Moreover, the Soviet socialist experience, I argue, continues to exert an influence on patterns of distribution and consumption.

A further remark concerns the *Dreesch*, which is used here to include three administrative units of Schwerin: *Großer Dreesch* proper, Neu Zippendorf and Mueßer Holz. My observations and interviews are limited to these three *Plattenbau* areas, and due to the short period of research, I did not interview post-Soviet migrants in other parts of Schwerin.



Figure 1: A square with *Plattenbau* buildings characteristic for this part of the *Dreesch*.

In what follows, I shall first briefly describe the way in which I used the method of network analysis for this research. Thereafter, I will present the results of my network analysis and the observations I made during four weeks of field research.

Research Method and Implementation

Network Analysis

My starting point was the question whether there exists a Russian network at the *Dreesch*. This question can be examined through network analysis. In order to identify the possible existence of networks, it is important to get a general grasp of the structures that shape people's everyday life. Modes of interaction can be of various kinds, ranging from love and intimate relations to the exchange of foodstuffs and the cooperation between corporate organisations. The goal of network analysis is to identify exactly in which ways particular actors or subgroups are engaged in the different modes of interaction. This first step of explanation is often followed by a second, which seeks to explain how the networks have come into being (Schnegg 2008: 210).

Network analysis works with an important assumption: individual actions can be more easily understood if the social relations between the actors are known. Social relations have the potential to engender agency, in that they provide access to resources of material or immaterial kind. By the same token, social relations (re-)constitute social structures, which limit the range of possible actions for an individual as they entail certain obligations and expectations (Schnegg 2008: 210). In order to understand how a network comes into being and what influence it exerts on actors' options in different fields, it does not suffice to have knowledge about the actors' interrelatedness. Basic data about the individuals or groups, such as gender, age or age cohort, citizenship etc. are needed to make sense of existing modes of relatedness. Moreover, dependent on the research question, it may be required to collect more complex data on individuals and groups, for example on their norms and values, attitudes, and motivations (Schnegg 2008: 210). In my study, individuals' activities and their participation in certain micro-cultures¹ reflect basic attitudes and motivations (see below).

A fundamental difference must be made between complete network analysis and egocentric networks, which require different strategies of data collection and analysis. As part of a complete network analysis, the task is to identify all modes of social relations that each actor

1 Microcultures are cultures connected with groups that form for a large variety of reasons and take up part of the members' time. Members need to learn specific cultural knowledge to be able to interact with other members (McCurdy, Spradley and Shandy 2005: 15).

of a given group maintains with every other actor within the group. By contrast, to describe a personal network, the task is to identify all social relations of an actor of a given group with any other actor, regardless of whether or not the latter belongs to the group in question (Schnegg and Lang 2002: 7). Initially I meant to study a complete network, but for reasons explained below, I had to divert from that plan. Instead, I elicited personal networks on the basis of an admittedly small sample, consisting of 10 individuals. During my interviews I wanted to connect the questions about social relations with my local experiences. This will be discussed in the following section.

Research Instruments

Data collection took place in June 2015. I conducted interviews following a predefined guideline that comprises six different categories of questions:

- (1) age, sex, citizenship, household size and average monthly monetary income;
- (2) participation in “micro cultures”, notably the frequency of the interviewee’s or family members’ involvement in collective religious, sportive or music activities, visits to the inner city of Schwerin as well as occasional journeys to the former Soviet Union;
- (3) hypothetical situations that help elicit intended relations in the fields of instrumental support, of advice in crucial situations of decision-making, of intensive emotional support, and lastly, the wider social environment;
- (4) a mapping exercise, within which interviewees were to mark the location of their place of work and the homes of the individuals mentioned under (3) on a map of Schwerin;
- (5) two questions on the language of communication at work and during private occasions;
- (6) finally, a question as to which public spaces of Schwerin are used and for what purpose.

Finding participants for my research was a task more difficult than expected. Initially, my idea was to apply the snowball method in order to use one interviewee for getting me acquainted with others, ultimately with the hope to arrive at a complete network. Notwithstanding my arrangements with a key informant prior to the beginning of my research, this approach did not work out: the contacts of my key informant signalled they had no time or no interest, and sometimes the language barrier was too high (i.e. my knowledge of Russian and theirs of German/English did not suffice to communicate). Therefore, I decided to create my “field” in a different way, approaching individuals directly in three shops that sell Russian foodstuffs and other goods (among these *Berezka*, i.e. Birch Tree, depicted on Figure 2). Additionally,

I contacted interviewees through voluntary educational associations (*Ver-eine*). These associations are specialised on educational programmes for children and adults and different cultural activities.

No longer being able to chart a complete network, I decided to pursue and document personal networks. Owing to the failure of the initial approach, the overall number of interviewees turned out to be rather small. However, even this decreased sample already offers a few insights on the existence and particularities of a “Russian network”, reported in the next section.



Figure 2: Berezka food shop at the *Dreesch*, one of the shops where interviewees were contacted for this study

I conducted structured and partly semi-structured interviews, wrote down the interviewees’ replies and/or let them enter the reply (e.g. for the mapping exercise). Further, I entered the data in Microsoft Excel and compiled them. The compilation process also facilitated a higher degree of anonymity of my interviewees.

Results

Network Analysis Results

Of my 10 interviewees, 70% are between 20 and 40 years of age; 60% are women and 40% are men. Except for one informant with German citizen-

ship all informants hold citizenship of a post-Soviet state: 30% come from Ukraine, 20% from Russia, 20% from Kyrgyzstan, 10% from Azerbaijan and 10% from Belarus. 30% are unemployed and 40% are divorced (with all of the unemployed informants being divorced). 70% have a regular source of income from work. The average monthly monetary income is between 900 and 1200 Euro in 40% of all cases. 20% of the informants have an even lower, 20% a higher income and 20% did not give precise information. As regards the relation between household size and income in my sample, households that consist of one or two persons have an average income of 900-1200 Euro per month. At least 50 % of the households with three or more members have an income over 1200 Euro.

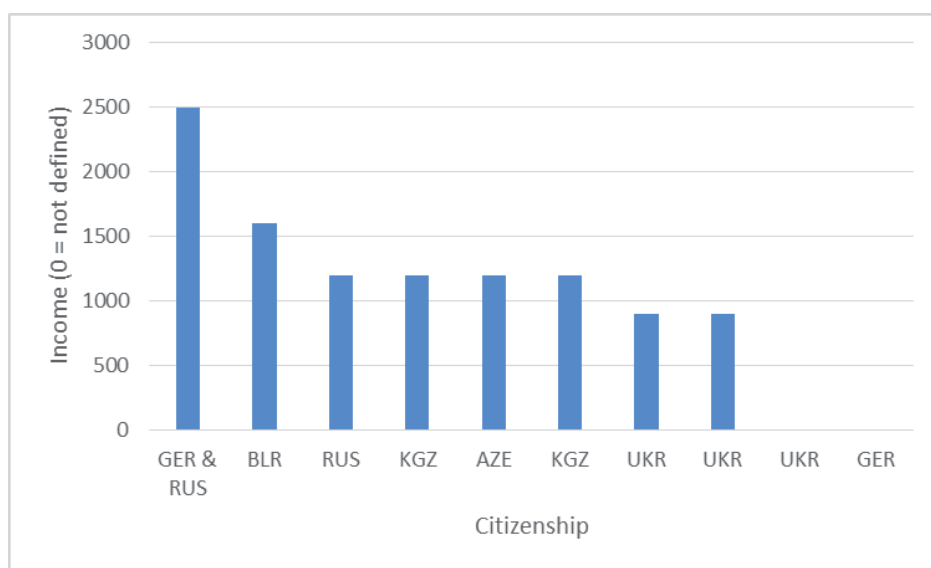


Figure 3: Monetary Income of Interviewees. Note: GER & RUS refers to an individual with double citizenship.

Of particular importance are the results about leisure activities and/or the participation in certain “microcultures”. The following data show that connectedness and networking works particularly strongly in this area through participation in certain microcultures.

Only one informant claimed to be member of a political party or organisation, and it was exactly this question that usually caused a certain awkwardness in interview situations, as will be explained below. However, more than half of the respondents stated that they are working as volunteers, for example giving computer courses or helping children with their homework. Additionally, more than half play or teach a music instrument. 80% of the interviewed people occasionally use the area of the city centre. It also turned out that 80% from time to time visit the countries of the former Soviet Union where they had grown up.

| Informant Number | Religious Community | Sport/Fitness | Political Activities | Voluntary Work | Music School | Visits to City Centre | Travelling to former region of residence |
|------------------|---------------------|---------------|----------------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|--|
| 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 4 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| 10 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Percentage | 20 % | 40% | 10% | 60% | 50% | 80% | 80% |

Figure 4: Microcultures (discussed below)

The questions of Category (3) were to prompt the interviewees to name people who are part of their personal network. On average, interviewees mentioned 7.8 contacts. Interestingly, there is a telling difference between those employed and those unemployed: the former named 8.4 contacts on average, while the latter named only 6.3. Keeping in mind the limited number of interviewees, it nonetheless seems appropriate to assume that unemployed individuals have less contact than those with a job. Moreover, low income implies a lesser degree of connectedness: of those interviewees with low income (900 to 1200 euros), 50% named only three different individuals whom they would contact when in need of support. A further significant result of this block of questions is that women were more likely to name female contacts whereas men were slightly more likely to name male contacts.

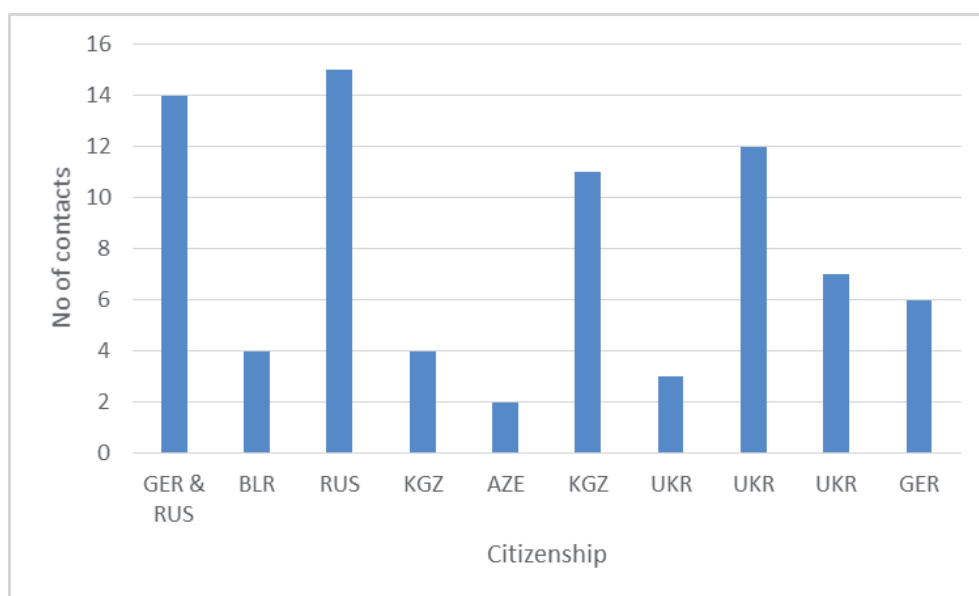


Figure 5: Contacts. Note: GER & RUS refers to an individual with double citizenship.

Highly interesting are the results of the mapping question (4), where the informants had to draw their place of work and social contacts elicited in (3) into a map of Schwerin.² The results show that all informants have contacts to people living at the *Dreesch*, but only 40% have contacts outside this area.

| Informant Number | Place of Residence | | Contacts Living at | |
|---------------------|--------------------|-----------|--------------------|-------------|
| | Home | Workplace | Dreesch | City Center |
| 1 | Stadt | Dreesch | 1 | 1 |
| 2 | Dreesch | Dreesch | 1 | 0 |
| 3 | Dreesch | Dreesch | 1 | 0 |
| 4 | Dreesch | Dreesch | 1 | 0 |
| 5 | Dreesch | Dreesch | 1 | 0 |
| 6 | Dreesch | Dreesch | 1 | 0 |
| 7 | Dreesch | Dreesch | 1 | 1 |
| 8 | Dreesch | Dreesch | 1 | 0 |
| 9 | Dreesch | Dreesch | 1 | 1 |
| 10 | Dreesch | Dreesch | 1 | 1 |
| Total | | | 100% | 40% |

Figure 6: Mapping social contacts at the *Dreesch* and City Centre (1 = social contacts exist, 0 = social contacts do not exist). “Stadt” is a German shorthand for city centre.

Reflections on Some Results – and on Fieldwork

It is well established in Social Anthropology that “the field” is always influenced to some extent by the appearance and the behaviour of the individual(s) exploring it. During my interviews I had the feeling that the description of my study and my university background led to some sort of insecurity or even alienation among potential interviewees, while the circumstance that I was born in the GDR and grew up in Schwerin implied some shared socialist biographical background. In combination with this, my (limited) command of Russian created some atmosphere of proximity.

What bewildered me was the fact that some potential interviewees, even though working in the shops of the *Dreesch*, had no or almost no command of German language; consequently, they had to resort to gestures to make clear they would be willing to participate in my research.

Repeatedly I made the experience that basic questions about age and citizenship were easy enough to produce a positive atmosphere. The question about income was uncomfortable – for me perhaps more than for my interlocutors, many of whom replied to this question in a relaxed and straightforward manner.

Conspicuously laconic were most interviewees’ responses as to their personal contacts. Some of them replied “my family” (i.e. some individual within the nuclear family) to nearly every question of whom to ask for help

² One informant had just recently moved to the city centre; before, this person had also been living at the *Dreesch* for a long time.

in different situations of need. It appeared to me that many interviewees had little or no contact to any “local” (non-migrant) residents.

In response to the question where people usually do their shopping, supermarkets were mentioned almost exclusively. Berezka and other Russian shops are known to all interviewees, but they are less used for daily provisions than for special occasions and events.

Of particular interest is the fact that my questions concerning the interviewees’ membership in political organisations were not only denied (except in one case) but also triggered people to say, “no, I am neutral”, “I am not into politics” etc. My question about religious commitment was met with similar responses. I was amazed by these abrupt reactions. Perhaps these can be explained by the Soviet and post-Soviet socialisation of my interviewees: religious commitment was officially not welcomed, and talks about politics were limited to informal situations while support to people in power was usually performed as a token commitment (Yurchak 2006). Perhaps my interviewees generally perceive religion and politics as uncomfortable topics, to be addressed only once a trustful basis of communication has been established. During a longer conversation, one interviewee did start talking about religious issues, mentioning her Jewish background and the fact that recently a Russian Orthodox Church was opened in Schwerin. This interview, along with some others, made me think about my role as a female researcher: my conversations with women appeared to bear the potential to become deeper and more trustful than with male interviewees. This observation resonates with the insight that female interviewees are more likely to name female individuals when being asked about whom they call on for personal support.

Conclusion

What emerges from the limited set of data is the fact that people with a migrant (post-)Soviet background living at the *Dreesch* are likely to have contacts with people from within the area, and more often than not with people who share a post-Soviet background. Consumption opportunities seem limited, whereas the distribution of resources and reciprocity of favours are of high importance for my interviewees, which is at least partly owed to the low average of household income. The degree of activities in associations (*Ver-eine*) is relatively high, but the family is the centre of social life. If in need of material or emotional support or advice, many would first ask family members and only then friends and neighbours.

As to the question if there is such a thing as a Russian-speaking network at the *Dreesch*, this is surely the case, and what is characteristic for this network is a quite high degree of *local* connectedness in combination with transnational ties between this place and a multitude of places in the former Soviet Union. Familial bonds are of pivotal importance: they are the

economic glue that I tried to identify in my initial hypothesis. Children are induced to participate in associations and become integrated into the network, as are their parents through engagement in microcultures. For most of my interviewees, familial connections are of multiplex character, though there is a slight tendency of gender-specific support, with women providing particularly strong support to each other.

With regard to the research experience, interviewing involved several situations when interlocutors were uncomfortable or even shy. Anthropological field research over a longer period of time would create more trust, and participation in one of the diverse associations (*Vereine*) would be a more productive strategy for developing rapport with Russian-speaking individuals. Such an approach seems to be valuable for exploring networks at the *Dreesch* in more detail, which is definitely a worthwhile endeavour for future research.

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Appendix

1. Questionnaire: Basic Data

| 1. Age | 2. Gender | 3. Citizenship | 6. Household Size | 7. Monthly Income [in euros] |
|-----------|--------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| under 20 | M | | 6.1. | 0-900 |
| 20-40 | F | 4. Professional Sphere | Marital Status | 900-1200 |
| 40-60 | Not defined | | 6.2. | 1200-1600 |
| 60-80 | | 5. Employment Status | Number of Household Members | 1600-2500 |
| | | | 6.3. | 2500-3500 |
| | | | Number of Children | 3500 + |
| | | | | |

2. Micro-Cultures: How often do you/does your family visit...?

| | Where? (Location) | | At least once per week | | At least every 2 weeks | | At least once per month | | Rarely | |
|-------------------------|----------------------|--------|---------------------------|--------|---------------------------|--------|----------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| | You | Family | You | Family | You | Family | You | Family | You | Family |
| Religious Activities | | | | | | | | | | |
| Sportive Activities | | | | | | | | | | |
| Political Activities | | | | | | | | | | |
| Volunteering | | | | | | | | | | |
| Music Schools | | | | | | | | | | |
| Visits to Inner City | | | | | | | | | | |
| Journeys to Former Home | | | | | | | | | | |
| Other | | | | | | | | | | |

3. Personal Networks (questionnaire adapted from Schnegg and Lang 2002: 19)

1. Let us assume you were in need of help in home-improvement matters, such as moving a large piece of furniture or installing a lamp. Whom would you ask for help? (Which ethnic group does the person identify with?)
2. Let us assume you had difficulties with filling in a form, e.g. for the job centre. Whom would you ask for help? (Which ethnic group...?)
3. Let us assume you were in need for advice in a very important matter, such as changing your job or relocating to a different place. Whom would you ask for help? (Which ethnic group...?)
4. Let us assume you were ill and unable to do your daily shopping. Whom would you ask for help? (Which ethnic group...?)
5. If you were to borrow money, whom would you ask? (Which ethnic group...?)
6. Who do you go with to a restaurant, for a walk, shopping, or go out with? (Which ethnic group...?)
7. Whom do you meet at least once per month (visiting, playing cards, shopping, etc.)? (Which ethnic group...?)
8. Of the people you know, has anyone recently moved house? If yes, who? From where to where? (Which ethnic group...?)
9. Apart from those already mentioned, who else would you ask for help?
10. Do you have non-Russian [-speaking] friends?
11. Do you have children? If yes, where do they go to school?
12. Where do you regularly buy foodstuffs?
13. Which are you closest five contacts?
14. How often and for how long do you travel “home”?

4. Mapping

On the map below, please mark your place of work and the homes of the individuals you just mentioned. [Interviewees were given a print-out map of Schwerin, source: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Ortsteile_Schwerin_Karte.png, scale: c. 1:80,000]

5. Language Skills

Which languages do you speak at home/with friends/while not at work (privat):

German: _____

English: _____

Russian: _____

Which languages do you speak at work:

German: _____

English: _____

Russian: _____

6. Public Spaces

Which public spaces in Schwerin do you use frequently? For what purpose?

Carmen Ziegler pursues her Master (MA) studies at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Universität Hamburg.